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Helping Disadvantaged Families Improve Their Diets

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As home economists, we are making breakthroughs on many fronts. I believe that one important breakthrough concerns our efforts to serve *all* families.

Invitations from home economists to learn about food and nutrition and other aspects of homemaking have been accepted mainly by middle-income families. The wealthy have many resources. The poor stay at home. We know that the disadvantaged don't come to the educational meetings open to all. We have not intentionally by-passed them, but the fact is that we have not — in any significant way — influenced their family living.

For more than a year, we have, as a profession, been actively seeking to learn how home economists can better serve the disadvantaged. Since the AHEA National Workshop in 1965, 67 Area and State Workshops on Working With Low-Income Families have been sponsored by State Home Economics Associations. These have reached home economists in many fields — Extension, teaching, welfare, public health, research, business. In all parts of the country, home economists are attending in-service training and short courses to find ways within their own organizational structure to better serve low-income people. Pilot projects have been set up to experiment and to test methods. The impact of these efforts is being felt in the increased contribution of home economists throughout the country.

We know that "business as usual" is out if we are to work effectively with the disadvantaged. We must try new and different methods and techniques. This implies, of course, that we are willing to do some pioneering. Blazing trails requires extra hours of work, and calls for imagination, ingenuity, and large measures of energy and enthusiasm. Full programs demand setting priorities on activities. Good judgment is needed in deciding on less important phases of work that can be dropped. We must be willing to experiment, to innovate, to make mistakes — in order to move forward.

No field of home economics has more to offer the disadvantaged than foods and nutrition. Many of the handi-

The response to the issues of NUTRITION PROGRAM NEWS on nutrition work with low-income families has been enthusiastic and the requests for more such articles have been numerous. In this issue we present an article on the home economist and her work in this area. It is based on presentations by Mrs. Irene H. Wolgamot given April 21 and Sept. 15, 1966, to the North Carolina Extension Foods and Nutrition Agents Training Conferences.

caps of low-income families could be lessened or overcome through nutritional improvement: poor health, low morale, lack of self-confidence, and low levels of energy. From these stem such serious problems as unemployment, school dropouts, delinquency, and family breakdowns.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE DISADVANTAGED

Facts About Low-Income Families.— First, we'll look at a few facts relating to the national scene. Almost one-fifth of our population — 18 percent — is considered to be living in poverty. This is shown by the most recent yardstick — a sliding scale of cash incomes that takes into account family size and ages of members. This low-income population consists of about 34 million persons living in 12 million households. It includes 6 million children under 6 years of age, 8 million children 6 through 15, and more than 5 million persons 65 years and over — half of them living alone. Almost half of the low-income households are headed by women. A fourth of the "poor" children are in these households.

Second, let's examine some facts from research in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Our findings show that food consumption and dietary levels are related to income, household size and composition, urbanization, and education of the homemaker. Diets of families with low incomes generally rate lower than those of families with

high-income levels. In large families with many children, the individuals usually have poorer diets than individuals in smaller families, particularly at the same income level.

A national survey indicated a direct relationship between the educational level of the homemaker and the adequacy of the family diet. The homemakers with more formal education provided better diets for their families. This held true for families at similar income levels. However, because the less educated homemakers were in the lower-income families, the poorest diets were found here.

Research shows that farm families produce and use more of their own food and have better diets, on the average, than rural nonfarm families. This is not surprising because the home-produced foods — milk, meat, poultry, eggs, fruits, and vegetables — are high in nutritive value.

Although there is a trend toward less home food production, it remains an important resource for farm families. The National Consumer Expenditure Survey showed that Southern farm families in 1961 home-produced an average of 35 percent of their own food, measured in money value. One of our recent surveys in a low-income rural area of Kentucky showed that the families produce 50 percent of their own food. In a low-income rural area of Texas, the families home-produced an average of 30 percent.

Characteristics of the Disadvantaged.— Knowledge of the people we want to reach is essential. We need to know how the families live and think in order to identify the barriers between them and good diets. Although disadvantaged people are not all alike, it is possible to identify some conditions and characteristics relating to them as a group. These have implications for nutrition work:

- Limited education. Many have low reading levels. Some are illiterate.
- Limited buying power. Sometimes, even with the most skillful planning, there is not enough money to provide adequate food.
- Lack of equipment and facilities for preparing, caring for, and serving food.
- Little skill and knowledge in the area of food and nutrition. Sources of information such as newspapers, magazines, and public library are not often used.
- Lack of participation in community organizations. Some do not socialize with neighbors.
- Distrust of the motives of those who want to help them.
- Deep depression. Some feel no one cares what happens to them.
- Multiproblem families. Ill health, retardation, illegitimacy, crime, and delinquency require specific types of help.

WORKING WITH THE DISADVANTAGED

Start Where They Are.— How many times have you heard that advice? Nevertheless, a first step is to find out where the disadvantaged are. What are their incomes and how do they spend their money? As you know, the lower the income, the greater the proportion that goes for food. And the greater is the importance of wise food selection.

What do you know about their food buying? How much do they spend? Where and how often do they shop for food? Who does the buying — the homemaker, man of the family, teenagers? Are they skillful food buyers?

Find out about their food habits, their meal patterns, their dietary lacks. Does the family eat together at least once a day, or not at all? Do the children carry lunch or get it at school?

Do the rural families produce food for home use? Could their program be improved through change in kinds and quantities produced? Through home canning or freezing? Through improved food storage?

Are they getting Federal food commodities? If not, are they eligible? Do they participate in the Food Stamp Program? Any children enrolled in Head Start or other preschool center? Are they fed there?

Knowing "where families are" will point out the changes needed in our programs. It will indicate how families can be assisted and enable us to avoid mistakes — mistakes like that illustrated in the following incident.

One incident that I recall concerned giving recipe sheets to a homemaker who could not read. When asked later if she had used them, her answer was "No." Of course, she did not explain why.

The food and nutrition problems are closely related to other aspects of family living — housing, home management, and human relations — and to the agricultural program for farm families. Home economists can work closely with Extension and other agencies to assist families when needed.

Develop Good Communication.— To communicate with the poor, we must understand them and their problems. We must care what happens to them.

We need to have compassion, patience, imagination, and flexibility. A certain amount of humility is in order, too, for we must be willing to listen and learn.

That the attitudes of rural low-income people in the South provide barriers to helping them is pointed out in a recent study. Dr. John E. Dunkelberger of the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station noted much pessimism among rural Southern low-income adults. He concluded: "It is highly probable that government programs and the people implementing them . . . are viewed with distrust and hostility." He believes that our first task is to develop

confidence that our program is a sincere attempt to help these rural low-income people.

Develop Confidence.— Developing confidence in us and our program and relating ourselves to those we want to help is a highly personal matter. It should be recognized that some people are not personally adapted to work with the poor.

There may be a few ground rules for working with the disadvantaged. One Extension worker in a Southern State discovered that her smile was "Open sesame" to obtaining the data she needed for her survey.

Perhaps you would describe this rule as a friendly manner or a warm personality — at any rate, we all react to it, regardless of our income level. And it can bridge the gap between us and others, including gaps of culture, race, and nationality. We may gain the confidence of those we want to reach immediately — or it may take a long time. But it is a first step, without which we cannot move forward with a program of education and assistance.

Methods to Use.— To help the disadvantaged upgrade their food habits, we must tailor our program around their problems and their characteristics, as they differ from those of more privileged groups. As home economists, we easily recognize unwise spending — for soft drinks instead of milk, cookies instead of enriched bread. We know so well how funds could be better spent and nutritious meals planned and prepared. We may be aware of community resources that offer help, which the family is not using. Our problem, of course, is to motivate the families to want to do something about their situation. We have to remember that it isn't what *we* think that is important — it is what the *homemaker and her family* think that determines what will happen.

The conditions and characteristics of the disadvantaged mentioned earlier suggest both subject matter and methods. Let's consider some of their implications for methods.

For people with little education, written materials are less important than the spoken word. These homemakers are unaccustomed to obtaining information from publications. Written materials must be short, simple, and pictorial. A few materials have been prepared and are being tested.

Through cooperative efforts of the Federal Extension Service, Consumer and Marketing Service, and Agricultural Research Service in USDA, a special version of the Daily Food Guide has been developed. This shows low-cost foods in the four food groups. It will be available in flyer form for families and also as a poster. Other flyers have been prepared on each of the four food groups; these include low-cost recipes to help families receiving Food Stamps or Federally donated foods.

Lectures, of course, are out. As with most groups, demonstrations are effective, if they show how to do something the homemaker is interested in doing. A practical

example might be how to make cookies with nonfat dry milk. As you know, a basic rule is to involve the people themselves. Encourage them to give — or at least help with — the demonstration.

Not long ago, a reporter expressed surprise when he attended a meeting in a District of Columbia neighborhood where a low-income homemaker was demonstrating how to make a cake. He had expected that the group would be learning to make a more basic dish. What he had failed to appreciate was that people who are depressed, who are on the ragged edge of existence, have a need for something bright in their lives. The carrot cake, which costs 70 cents and serves 12, represented glamour of a sort. The women enjoyed seeing it made. They had a chance to taste it. They learned how to make it. And, maybe as a result, a child will have a birthday celebration. Such an event will build self-confidence in the mother and delight the children. It may be of major importance in strengthening family morale and stability.

The disadvantaged have had many failures. They lack self-confidence. They fear being hurt again. It is important, therefore, to help them be successful. The undertakings must be suited to their abilities. The success may seem small, measured by our standards. For a homemaker, making a cake, canning some tomatoes, mixing donated dry milk so it is free of lumps and acceptable to her family are examples of small, but worthwhile successes.

More than middle-income people, the disadvantaged need to be reached with nutrition information in a way that offers fun. Assisting with or giving the demonstration and tasting the product help to fulfill this need. So does participation in skits about nutrition, developed around a down-to-earth, familiar situation. With little opportunity to go places, these homemakers consider a trip to a super-market or food manufacturing company a thrilling adventure as well as an educational experience. The cup of coffee and cookie served at a gathering may make it a social highlight.

It goes without saying that nutrition teaching must be built around the low-cost familiar foods that require little equipment to prepare and serve. Recipes should call for only a few ingredients and should use the donated commodities, if they are available to the families.

Guideline materials are for sale by the Government Printing Office. They contain suggestions on methods and on training for program aides in nutrition work with low-income families. They will also include basic nutrition leaflets for families.

Group Work.— Can we save our time and energy and reach more of the disadvantaged by working with groups? The answer is yes. This is already being done in public housing, in welfare departments, and in slum neighborhoods.

Homemakers who do not belong to any organization usually require individual contacts before they will participate in a group. We have to go to the disadvantaged — they do not come to us. Groups must meet in familiar places — in churches and other neighborhood meeting rooms.

Groups offer benefits needed by the disadvantaged. I know you have all had the experience of seeing a middle-class woman "bloom" through experience in a group, particularly if she develops into a leader. Disadvantaged homemakers can also become effective leaders.

Successful groups involve the participants in planning, organizing, and conducting the meetings. You may not want to use the word "meeting." You probably will not use the term "teach." If you are wise, you will ask the disadvantaged what they want and you will listen — for this will put you way ahead in your efforts to develop a willingness on their part to change their nutrition practices.

EXTENDING YOUR EFFORTS

Progress is slow with the disadvantaged. It is necessary to use every means to extend your efforts.

Use of Nonprofessional Workers.—Both paid and volunteer nonprofessionals are working successfully in programs for the poor. Homemakers on public assistance have worked as day care attendants, homemakers, and house-keeping aides in welfare and public health programs for many years. Home economists have trained them.

Presently, there is increased interest in the selection, training, and supervision of nonprofessionals in order to extend the program of the professional worker. This also provides a way to involve low-income people in projects that help them and others in their community.

The Home Economics Extension Service in North Carolina is using nonprofessionals to augment the professional staff in three pilot projects in low-income areas. In Alabama, ways of reaching young families are being explored. Nonprofessional program assistants report some concrete results: Better family meals, with lower grocery bills; clothes repaired and renovated; better use of the donated foods; house repairs made; yards cleaned up. Several husbands are taking vocational training. Young children have been enrolled in Head Start Centers. Older children have improved school attendance. Daughters have learned homemaking skills along with their mothers. Other projects in Arkansas and West Virginia are showing good results. The film "Spring Comes to Vintroux" shows how a program, developed around preschool children, has awaken-

ed a by-passed West Virginia community and encouraged families to work together to make it a better place to live.

Dr. Frank Riessman, in his book "Careers for the Poor," has pointed out that many nonprofessional jobs can become lifetime careers. The nonprofessional can communicate easily with families whose problems are familiar to her. She can provide a needed link between the professional and lower socioeconomic groups.

Work With Other Agencies.—The task of helping the disadvantaged to have better diets is so gigantic that we must be alert to contribute our special talents, as home economists, to programs of the community and of other organizations. Coordination of our efforts is essential to make an impact on the problems.

To be most effective, work with the disadvantaged must be related to that of other agencies and organizations. Other programs provide a setting for your own. The background setting in North Carolina, for example, includes the projects of Appalachia and of the North Carolina Fund. Closely related are programs of public health, welfare, and education.

The loans of the Farmers Home Administration to rural families for housing, small businesses, and community water and sewage systems may have implications for the nutrition situation. Home economists are now assigned to assist FHA families in 60 of the Nation's poorest counties.

New avenues of assistance to the disadvantaged have been opened by recent legislation. Some of these new efforts urgently need the help of home economists. The Office of Economic Opportunity's Community Action Programs can develop projects to raise nutritional levels of the poor. The best-known example, Project Head Start, needs advice and help on child feeding in its Centers. Its parent education component needs teachers.

In rural communities, the home economist is needed by the Rural Areas Development Committees. These committees are made up of community leaders concerned with developing and furthering programs to meet economic and social needs. Your viewpoint, counsel, and active help can encourage programs that raise nutritional levels.

Whether the home economist serves directly through work with families or indirectly as planner and organizer, consultant, or trainer, she has an opportunity greater than ever before to work effectively with the disadvantaged.

The cycle of poverty will never be broken until the low socioeconomic groups improve their practices of feeding their families, nurturing their children, and managing their financial resources.